DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 322 474 CS 010 167

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TITLE Action, Reflection and Reflexivity: Thinking in the Whole Language Classroom.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Environment; Classroom Techniques; Critical Thinking; Elementary Secondary Education; *Learning Activities; Reading Instruction; Reading Writing Relationship; Teacher Student Relationship; *Theory Practice Relationship; *Whole Language Approach; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Reflective Thinking

ABSTRACT

Whole language has to do with beliefs about language and learners that lead to beliefs about curriculum and instructional procedures. The term emerged as a label for the way language is thought to be learned: as a cohesive organization of systems working together as one--as a whole. The term whole language also refers to the learner as being whole--as sound and healthy, rather than flawed and in need of fixing. Whole language means that learners and teachers are at the center of curricular gravity; all materials and resources are used only if they are appropriate, authentic, and lead to student reflection and reflexivity. Invitations originate from the authentic life of the classroom and are issued by teachers, students, by appropriate and compelling resources and materials, and even from the acts of reading and writing themselves. Invitations to action that can lead to reflection and reflexivity come from students' abilities, interests and needs, and such invitations have to do with: listening and telling stories; reading real literature; writing with real intent; discussing and sharing with others; and solving difficult problems. Reflection involves the personal and systematic exploration of possibilities. Reflexivity involves independence, initiative, and creativity, and is characterized by restructure or extension of the present performance and the forging of new ideas or questions. When teachers serve as facilitators, give invitational demonstrations, and ask their students to do only those things that they are willing to do themselves, quality thinking and learning take place. (MG)

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Action, Reflection and Reflexivity: Thinking in the Whole Language Classroom

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Introduction

"Although literacy serves many different functions in society, each with its own cognitive demands, two very different patterns of thinking and reasoning mark the range of alternatives...

The first kind of literacy activity is unreflective, invoking the kinds of thinking that often lead to a superficial understanding of the material.... The second kind of literacy activity requires deeper thinking about ideas and information: it emphasizes the integrated nature of language and thought, and highlights the importance of critical thinking and advanced literacy skills as part of the process of learning to read and write."

Applebee and Langer (Chapter 1, page 1&2 in this text)

After observing in numerous classrooms and after talking with many concerned teachers, my impression is that Applebee and Langer are right-on-the-mark in their assessment of both students' patterns of thinking and reasoning, and of the classroom literacy activities that lead to either reflective or unreflective thinking. But despite what might be interpreted as a discouraging report on the wide use of instruction and testing that emphasizes unreflective thinking we should take heart, for there are those classrooms in which students are invited regularly to become reflective and reflexive, that is, to become critical thinkers. Typically, the teachers in these classrooms, referred to as whole language, hold specific beliefs about students, about learning and about how students eagerly become literate.

This paper will attempt to do two things: (1) present ways in which teachers in whole language classrooms through invitational demonstrations have moved their students through mere action to

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critical thought and (2) discuss the roles that action, reflection and reflexivity play in whole language classrooms.

Thinking In Whole Language Classrooms

Because many of the terms used here hold a variety of meanings for readers, I feel the need to offer my definitions for: whole language; action, reflection, and reflexivity; and invitational demonstrations.

Whole Language

Whole language has to do with beliefs about language and learners that lead to beliefs about curriculum and instructional procedures. The term emerged as a label for the way language is thought to be learned: as a cohesive organization of systems working together as one -- as a whole. Semantics, grammar, and graphophonemics are the linguistic systems that must be kept whole if they are to be perceived as somthing sensible from which meaning (whether reading or writing) can be constructed. Further, these mutually supportive systems take on life and meaning as the learner makes connections within an authentic setting that includes 1) the environment in which the language is used, and 2) the knowledge and experiences that learners bring to the oral or written language event.

The term whole language refers not only to language as an unfragmented whole, but also to the learner as being whole, -- that is, whole language is a way of saying that we must approach learners as sound and healthy, rather than diseased and in need of diagnosis, or flawed and in need of fixing. This view of students as whole is exciting and enlightening, for it leads directly to beliefs about

instruction and curriculum. When students are thought of as whole and healthy they are more likely to be viewed as resources, as members of a community who must contribute to very important events in their lives-- what goes on in their classroom, what happens to other learners in that classroom and particularly to what their own constructions will be as they read, write, listen and speak.

When students are thought of as whole and healthy there is less urgency to categorize, label, and prescribe certain instructional procedures. Because of a label some students may not be expected to engage in dialogue or literacy experiences that require them to reflect or to think in more than a linear way on a surface level. When students are thought of as whole and healthy, if learning difficulties become evident, the problems are never presented without first considering the student's learning proficiencies and potentials. When students have trouble with reading, writing and thinking, the existing program is first scrutinized for the possibility of contributing to, even causing, the problems. When students are thought of as whole and healthy their mistakes and miscues are considered to be a natural part of the writing, reading and thinking processes.

Whole language means that learners and teachers are at the center of curricular gravity. All materials and resources such as guides, textbooks and tests are peripheral, and used only if they are appropriate, authentic and lead to student reflection and reflexivity. Just as language and students are kept intact, so too is the curriculum: students write, read, listen, speak (that is, they think) about meaningful and potentially meaningful aspects of math, science, social studies, the humanities, etc. Just as the

language arts are used in mutually supportive ways, so too are the curricular areas presented as integrated and multilayered: the realities, formats, even the language of one content area enriches and enlightens the messages of other content areas.

Invitations and Invitational Demonstrations

As part of the instructional procedure, either assignments can be issued or invitations can be offered. When assignments are issued they are made by the teacher, rarely is choice possible, the process in completing them is usually ignored while the product is valued and evaluated, they may or may not be relevant to the lesson or to the lives of the learner, and they are almost always a directive to act on something.

Invitations originate from the authentic life of the classroom and are issued by teachers, students, by appropriate and compelling resources and materials, and even originate from the acts of reading and writing themselves. When teachers and students issue invitations there is a social connotation evident, in that the invitations (whether deliberate or spontaneous) are considerate of the recipient, presented attractively, and offered courteously. When invitations originate from literature and other whole language artifacts, there is a great deal of enticement involved, and there always exists the possibility of pleasure and satisfaction. When invitations originate from the processes of reading and writing there is the exciting tension of moving toward the creation of new meaning, and thinking (often reflexivity) is always involved.

When teachers make demonstration a part of their invitation, the chances of student acceptance increases. For example, when students are invited to write in their journals, teachers

demonstrate by writing in their own journals, perhaps even leaving their journals open and available for students to read and respond to with written comments. This invitational demonstration indicates to students that the task is regarded highly and is considered to be worth the efforts of both student and teacher.

Teachers expect students to accept their invitations, and they have every right to do so if they have done their homework: that is, if they have used students as curricular informants (Harste,1984), if they know appropriate literature and other suitable resources, and if they understand what it is to read, write and think.

Action

The assumption in an action or act-on-this approach to reading, writing and thinking is that momentum will build from the stimulus of a teacher's assignment, resulting in comprehension of a well defined set of facts or the production of a text -- an assigned task will be completed. Typical action assignments that too often lead students into a continuous loop of non-reflective activities are: "Read the chapter and answer the questions at the end" "Look up each word in the dictionary and write the definition, use each word in a complete sentence, and give special attention to the spelling demons" "Select the main idea and list all supporting facts" and "Do workbook pages 33-38." Typical action assignments that on the surface appear to be less busy work, but at best allow a few students to break out of the non-reflective loop are: "Finish this story, 'The boys heard the chilling sound of the wolf in the distance...'" "Write a tall tale" "Read and retell this story" "Write a synopsis of Chapter V."

The problems with such assignments and the assumptions underlying them are numerous, but to discuss only three: First, the teacher or the textbook authors decide what is worthy of emphasis. If someone other than the learner selects what is to be valued and if their selection is not consistent with what the learner deems worthy there is little liklihood of making an experiential link with any new information presented. Louise Rosenblatt (1978) tells us of the need to live through , that is, to transact with information as the learner takes it in, changes it, and presents or thinks about it in new ways . If learners are assigned to act on rather than invited to live through a literacy experience they often resort to ego preserving strategies such as faking it, rebelling (resulting in "behavior problems") or worse yet -- giving in, expecting and accepting boredom; and even being rewarded for their performance on nonreflective, mere action assignments. A second problem with such assignments is that the chosen facts that gain attention are considered irrefutable amd need not be thought about in depth or with creativity. In real life, what may be a fact today may not be one tomorrow: the earth is flat, atoms are indivisible, people cannot fly. Third, the assignment to action only, often leads to the halting of self-initiated action that might lead to reflection and reflexivity.

In classrooms in which action is expected to lead to critical thought, the first invitation given to students is the classroom itself; it and all the artifacts in it indicate to students that here is a place to actively learn and teach, and to enjoy doing both. Invitations to action that can lead to reflection and reflexivity come from students' abilities, interests and needs,

and such invitations have to do with listening and telling stories; reading real literature; writing with real intent; discussing and sharing with others; and solving provocatively difficult, but not impossible problems.

Reflection and Reflexivity

In order to understand the thought processes of reflection and reflexivity it is helpful to consider Brooks Smith's personal knowing cycle, in which he presents learning as the transforming of experiences into knowing by gaining an awareness and impression of something worthy and of interest to the learner (perceiving); by analyzing, hypothesizing, and categorizing (ideating); and by using symbolic structures and forms such as language, dance, and art to express ideas and feelings (presenting). Perceiving, ideating and presenting come about when teachers help students experience the world by bringing it into awareness through describing, comparing, and labeling it (confronting and heightening awareness); by finding problems and solving them, experimenting and making connections to previous experiences (dialoguing); and by debating, challenging, and recontextualizing new ideas (assessing, applying and demonstrating). (Goodman, Smith, Meredith and Goodman, 1978)

When students are invited to live through authentic literacy events rather than to act on or act out an assignment, the possibility of reflection and reflexivity exists. In reflecting, students make the unfamiliar familiar by relating it to events, ideas, patterns, pictures, characters, anything that has experiential meaning to the thinker. A sense of patterns and interrelations of phenomena emerges. Reflection involves the personal and systematic exploration of possibilities. This

reflective thought is the beginning of critical thinking.

When students gain perspective on their own endeavors and then move toward a goal that is beyond their present accomplishment they are engaging in higher order critical thinking -- reflexivity. Such thinking involves independence, initiative and creativity, and is characterized by restructure or extension of the present performance and the forging of new ideas or questions.

In Theory and In Practice

Writing, Reading, and Thinking

To illustrate how one teacher, Carol Gilles, helped her student move from action through reflection to reflexivity consider the following. It was usual procedure for Carol, along with her students (labeled Learning Disabled), to write daily in their journals. They wrote about things that were important to themselves in and outside the classroom and some wrote about what they were studying in their mainstream classes. Students and teacher shared their journals with each other and often responded to journal entries by writing notes to each other. It was also typical that Carol and the students listened to, read, and wrote a great deal of poetry. After studying about Machu Pichu, the lost city of the Andes, Doug wrote the following in his journal.

Insert #1 Lost City

In order to write about the lost city, Doug needed to reconsider, that is to reflect, on what he had learned. Through imagery he transmediated what he considered important from his study and produced it in one paragraph, complete with nonstandard grammar and eight instances of functional spelling.

Except for the question mark in the right margin indicating that she couldn't construct meaning, Carol chose to focus on Doug's reflection, the mirror on his learning, and to write in the left margin, "Doug - this is like a poem! I feel like I'm there!"

Perhaps if it had not been for the healthy atmosphere of his classroom Doug might not even have read Carol's note, or might have read it but without giving it a second thought. But the class was set up to transcend, to step back once more, to think critically - that is, to go beyond oneself by coming back to one's experiences. Doug again lived through his experience -- this time the excursion resulted in poetry.

Insert #2 Lost City - Poem

Doug's reflection on what he valued in his learning about the Andes, and his reflexivity on both what he had written as well as on his teacher's comment, and the facilitating classroom in which poetry and sharing were familiar and accepted, encouraged Doug to think critically, and as a final act -- to create.

Doug's critical thought involved objectively judging his own work and identifying both its merits and flaws. That which he judged worthy he honed into poetry; that which he judged flawed he discarded ("So cold you have a hot bath or your water freeses.") or, with the help of classmates, he changed from nonstandard to standard form (spelling and syntax).

Reflexivity within critical thought can involve induction, deduction, and clarification by analogy, but most importantly it involves the creation of something new. Doug's abductive reasoning facilitated the restructuring of knowledge, and allowed him to present what he knew and felt, first in prose and then in poetry. Without his teacher's comment it is doubtful that Doug would have returned to his work and subsequently thought beyond it to a new creation.

Reading, Writing and Thinking

Literature Discussion Groups begin with informed teachers inviting students to read literature that they feel their students will find worthy of thinking about in depth. Typically, five books are presented to the students along with the invitation to choose one that will be read independently and discussed in a small group with others who have read the same book. The teacher's first invitation is to make a choice; to do so the students reflect on the title, the brief book introduction made by the teacher, the author, the genre -- anything that can help them connect with their interests and lives, and subsequently do something assertive -- make a choice.

Primary children (including kindergardners) typically read the book with their teacher; ask questions about it; point out

patterns in story, illustrations, and format: and relate the story to their own life and to past literature they have lived through. They then read the book on their own or with a partner, and respond to the literature by making a poster, map, a play, tape, written conversation, or they respond in any way that causes them to return once more to the literature and to themselves in order to make personal connections with the story. The children and teacher meet again to share and reflect on their intensive reading.

Older students listen to a brief review of the book, make their personal selections, as a group assign themselves a given number of pages to read, and begin their reading. Journals or "literature logs" are used to promote personal and intensive reading in which the students read reflectively; reflections on the literature as it relates to their past experiences including their past readings and writings are recorded. Early journal entries tend to follow the act-on-this-book assignment in which the reader for the most part reproduces the text. Dawn is a student in Jana Dresdon's seventh-grade class. Following is Dawn's first entry.

> September 10
> I chose The Wizard in the Tree because Tina chose it and we wanted to be in the same group. Tina read some of Lloyd Alexander's books last year and she says they are good. In this story Mallory gets an enchanter out of a root of a tree that he was trapped in. His name is Arbican. Mallory asks for three wishes because that is what people usually get who help out enchanters. That's what she thought! Arbican said why don't you ask for a thousand wishes and see what you get. But he did try to get something for her -- no luck he was rusty. Since Arbican had lost some of his powers Mallory took him to a cave. Albican is a real grump, but they talk and get to know each other anyway. Abrican tells her he will die if he doesn't get to Vale Innis.
> Tina is right Lloyd Alexander is a good writer.

Later in the year after several months of

reading extensively: "More books than I've ever read in my life." and intensively: returning to the story through personal reading and rereading, journal writing, and group discussion Dawn writes in her log:

January 23

I didn't know there was a book that had my name!!! That's why Mrs. Dresdon put this book in the selections. She says that I should get a copy of it for myself. At first I thought it was just a book for little kids but it isn't. In a way it's like a kid's picture book but its very adult. It's for me. And it is beautiful. I guess first graders and everyone would love it. I do!

It's an old Chinese poem that Uri-Shulevitz made pictures for. My favorite part is -- "Now, a light breeze. The lake shivers." I've been on the lake a hundred of times when it looked just like the pictures. When we camp my dad gets us up real early to go out on the lake and fish for a while. This author has it just right when day dawns, dawn, DAWN! We come back and have breakfaut.

I've read the book about six time and looked at the pictures a million times. Are there other books by this person? Is Uri Shulevitz a man or woman? I'm going to get a copy for my own!

One of Dawn's last entries indicate her ability to think critically about what she is reading and about her own efforts.

May 20

This is the last book in our literature groups. I had a hard time choosing this time. but I love Molly Hunter and even though the print is really little I decided on A Pistol in Greenyards .

When I first started reading I thought about how much Connal reminds me of Kim in The Witch of Blackbird Pond . The story starts out on a ship just like WBP, but it's more than the setting and the characters --the writing even seems the same. And another funny thing, I thought Connal was a girl until someone called him a he. He reminded me a lot of Kim -- who was of course a girl!

I think I really like books that are fiction but about history. I like all the ones I read by the Colliers especially My Brother Sam is Dead and now this one is exciting too. I haven't read anything about Scots coming to America, but I have of other people coming. It seems that Scots came because they were

treated bad by big land owners and there was a lot of prejudice against some of them just like against some of the people who came because their beliefs were hated.

This writing is good. It starts out on the boat to America but goes back to earlier in 1854 when Carron and his sister were in Scotland. These are flash backs and other authors use this technique. I'm going to try it.

When Dawn and the five other members, including the teacher, of her discussion group met to talk about A Pistol in Greenyards Phillip started the conversation by asking if anyone else was worried about finishing the book before the end of the school year, and added that he had read beyond their group regulated assignment. Dawn and the other students registered similar concern and began to plan ways they could get extra time for reading. Laurn asked if anyone knew what a "bonnie ribbon" was. Dawn said she thought it was a shade of red while Perry said that it meant pretty. Laurn said both definitions would work and that she might look it up. Dawn volunteered to read from her journal, stopping as she did so to elaborate on her comments. She then said she had decided to use the flashback in a story she was writing, "because I can describe my character as she is now, then flash back to different parts of her life to let people see why she is like she is, and does what she does. My character will be a little like Connel, but more like Kim in A Witch on Blackbird Pond . She is going to have some special characteristics -- some like me."

These three excerpts from Dawn's journal show her movement from action on a story by giving a thin

retelling of it (The Wizard in the Tree), to reflection on a book that moved her so much that she read it again and again (Dawn), to reflection on a story that allows her to make connections with her life and with the literature in her life (A Pistol in Greenyards). Finally, the discussion group provides a forum in which Dawn could be reflexive. She pondered the story once more as she read from her journal and talked about it with her friends; she thought critically about her own writing and about a technique used by the author, Molly Hunter, and she began to develop a character in her own story by making the technique her own.

Quality Teaching and Quality Learning

In these two instances both teachers were facilitators -- and through their efforts, quality thinking and learning took place. Both teachers gave invitational demonstrations: they asked their students to do only those things that they were willing to do themselves: read, write, discuss, and think about things that were immediate, engaging, important and real. Through thoughtful invitations to share in the kind of action that leads to reflection and reflexivity both Doug and Dawn thought critically about their own efforts with text; and moved naturally and eagerly into creations of their own.

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Lost City

A sheer rock face strate up no had hold
no foot hold gust smooth rock and one
hard climb up. Up to where a long lost city
built on a mountains and forgot high
in the andes mountans So did you have
a hot bath or your water frosses.
Now a grapling hook flies it cont you pull 1?
your self up the last 20 feet you look
at long last your lost city.

Doug - this is like a poem! I feel like I'm there!

Lost City

A sheer rock face
straight up
No hand holds
no foot holds
just smooth rock
and
One hard climb
climb to where
a long lost city is
built on a mountain
and forgotten
A grapling hook flies
it catches
You pull yourself up
Then you look at
your long lost city